

Adolescent overdose deaths hit a new high this year, nearly tripling from 2019 to 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. News outlets have been inundated with stories of high school students overdosing in school bathrooms. As panicked and unprepared educators find themselves newly on the frontlines of this nationwide crisis, the Biden administration has officially called upon schools to intensify drug prevention efforts.

The suggested measures in the White House letter include naloxone distribution and preventive educational programs. While the government's explicit support of drug prevention in schools is a crucial step, the resources offered to educators by way of preparation are unfortunately wholly unsuited to the magnitude of the current crisis, a relic of a pre-fentanyl era.

As an educational consultant, I work with diverse school districts on drug prevention and education strategies. My commitment to finding real solutions started in high school — I survived my own struggles with drug use and misuse, but lost several close friends to overdoses. I've witnessed the ineffective pendulum swings of school-based responses to adolescent drug use. We went from "Just Say No" to "Just Say Nothing," and none of it worked. We need a new approach — what experts call "Just Say Know." And it needs to happen now.

Harm reduction, an evidence-based approach that aims to reduce the negative consequences associated with substance use, is regarded as an overdose prevention best practice by governmental and public health agencies alike. Yet none of the educator resources suggested in this letter to schools contain overdose prevention strategies. Instead, they focus on outdated "life skill training" programs, which are unfortunately both irrelevant to and inadequate for the scale of our current crisis.